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Lie Detesters: Promoting Rhetorical Responsibility in the Classroom

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There is an inherent tension in a public platform that both invites artful persuasion and champions personal freedom. In the ancient text *Gorgias*, Plato calls rhetoric not only "the cause of freedom to men in general," but also any man's source of "power over others in his own city" (10). Perhaps we can find some sort of comfort in knowing that the cacophony of public discourse is not merely a modern phenomenon. Aristotle was right: in order to be effective rhetoricians, we must understand what is most persuasive, even, I would add, if we find it distasteful ourselves. Given this tension, teachers of rhetoric must determine how best to equip students to enter into public discourse responsibly and democratically.

Surely, as a society, we prefer amusement and affirmation to the truth, and this is not, as some might posit, the fault of social media. Socrates made the same observations regarding the effectiveness of the Sophists more than two thousand years ago (Plato 14). We want the truth as long as it comes easily and affirms our sensitivities, which is perhaps why contemporary adolescents continually accept as true the falsified ads that pop up in the sidebar of their screens. It also explains why famous actors and athletes, whose money and fame distance them greatly from the realities of most Americans' lives, carry such significant rhetorical sway in the public sphere.

Humankind has always had a tenuous relationship with the truth, so perhaps some clarification is needed. By truth, I refer to what Couture calls "the capacity of individuals to express the truth of their experience" (98). She goes on to say that in spite of its limitations, words, whether written, spoken, or merely pondered, hold power to "develop truth and value in human experience" (Couture 2). Truth claims of any kind are often met with resistance in a relativistic, post-modern or, some would say, post-truth culture, yet I would argue that we can differ philosophically on our notion of truth while acknowledging a common interest in it.

It is neither my intention nor within my expertise to examine the role of rhetoric over the last couple of thousand years in regards to truth-seeking, -telling, and -destroying. Rather, my intention is two-fold: to take a realistic look at contemporary rhetoric, and from that perspective, to consider theoretically how we might better teach responsible, by which I mean truth-oriented, rhetoric in our classrooms. From this theoretical framework, I will introduce specific ways to adjust teaching practices for the purpose of promoting responsible rhetoric. My use of the term realistic is a reaction to the countless articles on rhetoric that

are written as though any teacher in any school, given the right strategies, might become so inspirational as to evoke meaningful discourse that transforms students and transcends the classroom. Consider Wayne Booth's Rhetopia, a well-written imagining of rhetorical bliss, where teachers experience the "sheer joy of *connecting*, rhetorically, trustingly, with their students" (104). Not only is it unrealistic, but it also assumes that a pedagogical solution exists to humankind's tendency to dominate one another through the "most available means of persuasion" (Rorty 715). While I appreciate Booth's aspirations and will adopt his term, Rhet-Ed, when I reference the enormously undervalued curriculum of rhetoric in schools, I find his "quest for communication" (Booth 89) to lack real-world substance.

In our classrooms, we are not "fixing" humanity but developing thoughtful citizens; therefore, we must exist in the mess of reality, aware that students -- and their teachers, parents, administrators, politicians, and Instagram followers -- love to win an argument, fuel a debate, watch a fight, and choose a lie. For this reason, truth-seeking is essential to rhetorical instruction, and students must learn to recognize their own potential for deceit as a rhetorical liability. As a result, their responsibility extends beyond the public platform to inward examination, through which students see themselves critically as both influential and easily influenced.

In order to create a truth-seeking learning environment, we must first consider a realistic view of contemporary rhetoric. When Aristotle insisted that his discourses were subordinate to truth, and that only honest orators could rightly handle rhetoric (35), he did not anticipate the fluid nature of modern rhetoric, where apparently, everyone's an author (Lunsford et al.), and most of us are skeptics (Couture), deleting, muting, and unfollowing even first-time offenders against our personal sensitivities. Couture explains the conundrum well: "We are trying to use language as if it can be truthful while believing that it cannot be" (8). The resulting frustration postures students (and their teachers) to accept "conflict and persuasion" as synonymous with rhetoric (Couture 1-2).

Since the 1980s, rhetoricians have sought to remedy this hostility of public discourse. I admire rhetoricians like Foss and Griffin, whose invitational rhetoric promotes listening and understanding, as well as teacher-rhetors like Burke, who considers rhetoric "a tool to overcome divisions" (Rutten and Soetaert 729). Their perspectives are valuable, extending beyond the mere tropes and schemes that are commonly associated with rhetoric. But when I consider my classroom, *realistically*, I see ordinary students and an ordinary teacher, all of whose interests are often self-indulgent and short-sighted. I want to equip *these* students and their teachers to handle the real and unrelenting messages of modern discourse responsibly. For instance, when I read about Kenneth Burke's "conversation of humankind" (Lunsford et al. xxxiii), whereby ideas are shared, challenged, and shaped through the unifying work of "critical reflection" (Rutten and Soetaert 734), I feel simultaneously inspired and exhausted, because in a culture inundated with messages, constant critical reflection, while admirable, is exhausting. To whatever extent this rightly captures the feelings of many contemporary adults, how much more so must it speak to adolescents who would rather "follow" a post than challenge its credibility.

Furthermore, the rapid pace of contemporary discourse has muddled the question of individual responsibility. For example, when I open my Facebook account, I encounter a question: "What's on your mind, Sarah?" What is my responsibility at this moment? Who is asking the question and how fluid is the audience that receives my response (Lunsford et al. 135)? Marback asserts that even our brief interactions, including those on social media, are rhetorical, since all human relationships are shaped by our desire "to appeal to, influence, inspire, or persuade each other" (3). An individual who takes risks in order to tell "the whole truth that he thinks" and "accept the hurtful truth that he hears" (Foucault 13) is an enigma to students who fear social backlash for speaking honestly. In order to counter such fears, teachers must show students the here-and-now benefits of communicating responsibly, by which I mean, clearly and truthfully.

This is the work of Rhet-Ed, to garner the tools necessary for such an endeavor. To be clear, this approach is not new, yet it is often ineffective. In order to move forward, we must adapt a realistic lens: Our students are only likely to pick up a rhetorical tool if they believe it's in their own best interest to do so. Otherwise, every strategy we teach will exist only as classroom theory while "real" discourse continues on their screens. I propose a rethinking of Rhet-Ed that centers the discussion around individual students, who learn to examine lies as liabilities, a necessary step toward responsible participation in public discourse. My theoretical approach involves three goals: to advance the practice of private discourse, to promote individual research, and to elevate self as audience.

Rhet-Ed begins with an examination of private rhetoric as the means by which students gain an understanding of personal truth as essential to public discourse. Contemporary discourse is marked by immediacy and sensationalism. In order to be heard, we must compete for a scroll; therefore, thoughtful reflection is tossed aside for something faster and sexier. As much as the Internet has exacerbated this tendency, Barbara Couture anticipated this trend over twenty years ago, long before we carried our phones in our back pockets. Her discussion of phenomenological rhetoric (phenomenological refers to the study of consciousness and personal experience) values private writing as an individual's personal pursuit of meaning and truth. She warns against rhetoric that endlessly seeks to "make a case for a truth that will win out over someone else's vision of reality" (Couture 98), a concern that Plato shared when he detected the dichotomy between rhetoric and "truth-oriented inquiry," which requires private reflection (Rorty 717). Teachers do not disagree, but the call to universal and immediate authorship is alluring to our students and disrupts the instruction of thoughtful discussion.

In order to make meaningful progress toward teaching rhetorical responsibility, teachers need to temper the glorified portrayal of authorship with real-world warnings about hasty rhetoric. Those who shout out their messages without having sought to integrate their knowledge of the world with a command of their own thoughts are deceiving others and themselves (Wahlstrom 441). Unfortunately, in many classroom syllabi, the focus is on the familiar strategies of ethos, pathos, and logos to convey a message, which means that students inevitably prioritize how to speak convincingly over what they actually say. When Quintilian wrote *Institutio Oratoria*, outlining the five can-

ons every teacher of rhetoric knows well, it took time for rhetors to hear opposing viewpoints, and opportunities to respond were rare and consequently valued. Currently, the opportunities to publish every thought or argument at any stage along its development, undermines our understanding of authorship.

To be fair, the highly experienced teacher-rhetoricians who wrote *Everyone's an Author* acknowledge the need for "scrupulous and wise discourse" in an era where anyone with access to the Internet can speak boldly and unchallenged to an unlimited audience (Lunsford et al. xxx). In their textbook, however, this acknowledgement is more celebratory than cautionary. I see this celebration as short-sighted and in response, would offer Foucault's discussion of practical reason, "which enables good decisions to be taken and false opinions to be driven out" (86), as a helpful balance in the classroom. According to Foucault, practical reasoning encourages students to "attend to themselves, that is to say, of their reason, of truth, and of their soul" (86). Perhaps an appeal to the soul will be lost on some of our students, in which case, I propose Booth's warning: When we fail to pause and consider our own message and its truth to us as rhetors, then we are making ourselves comfortable in a "house of gullibles" (90), and no one, teacher or student, wants to be duped.

Private discourse is the discipline of examining our own thoughts in order to speak about our ideas truthfully in the public sphere, and its value is making sure we have something substantial to say before we say it. Rhet-Ed should allow students time to pause for reflection, convincing them that such a pause is more beneficial to both themselves and their audience than a sensationalized shout or an inflammatory post. A belief adopted in isolation, however, must undergo a strenuous research process if it is to withstand the scrutiny of public discourse, and teachers should promote students to the role of researcher, guiding them through the difficult but rewarding task of listening to other voices. Although our access to information has multiplied infinitely in the last several decades, students still need instruction in connecting that knowledge to their real-life experiences. As a result, handling information, as opposed to finding information, is now central to classroom instruction on research.

Many rhetoricians argue that knowledge is void until it interfaces with society. Consider, for instance, Burke's position that the "conversation of humankind builds the world's accumulated knowledge" (Lunsford et al. xxxiii) or Davidson's classification of knowledge as essentially communicative, with dialogue as the impetus for advancing both private and public knowledge (Wahlstrom 442). Because my aim is more pedagogical than philosophical, I will simply borrow from Socrates' claim, which relates to instruction specifically: The "exact truth" is discovered upon conversation and reflection (Plato 24) and "happens only in the social context of a dialogic and dialectic interaction" (Petruzzi 18). In a classroom, students solidify their views and their values, while contributing to those of others through intentional dialogue. When chastising Gorgias for teaching rhetorical strategies over and above the pursuit of knowledge, Socrates insists that right rhetoric requires engaging with one another "in a search" for truth (Plato 100). Teachers must provide the research skills necessary to prepare students for this type of truth-seeking discussion.

To begin, classroom discussions should offer opportunities for research as a "common activity," or what Dewey termed, a reflective experience (Wahlstrom 437). Students should first thoughtfully consider and privately articulate their own perspectives, then examine what others, including classmates, are saying about the matter. Wahlstrom describes the aim of meaningful, interactive research as "elucidating differences" rather than passively getting along (437). As a society, and particularly as teachers, we want to imagine that our pluralistic and progressive culture is welcoming of differences, but political correctness robs the classroom of opportunities for students to truly understand differences. Such censorship inhibits the research process and destroys rhetoric (Booth 95-96), leading to the hate-filled ignorance that characterizes much of social media.

For this purpose, Dewey challenged teachers to resist the tendency to give easy answers. Beholden to the Information Age, students race to a search engine, trusting the most frequently viewed data that fills the tops of their screens, in order to avoid the discomfort that Dewey believed is critical to true education. He insisted that "the learner must risk his or her view of the world to get to know parts of the world not yet known" (Wahlstrom 434). For teachers, the challenge lies in giving students sufficient reason to push past the simplest route of research, not "entrusting" themselves to those with the most enticing promise, but rather to those who themselves "know something" about the topic being explored (Aristotle 267). Students must recognize that their reputations are at stake. After all, not understanding what others have said and are saying leads to discourse that is not only empty, but easily mocked.

My final goal in approaching Rhet-Ed is to elevate the need for individual rhetors to see themselves as their own best audience, examining biases in their arguments and cultivating what Burke calls an "interior countercheck" (Rutten 738). In *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*, Booth argues that the greatest problem facing Rhet-Ed is *rhetrickery*, a term he uses to capture the "failure to detect deliberate deception" (42). Booth's concern is warranted, insofar as students are often misled by salacious lies and loud taunts, reluctant to investigate a rhetor's honesty or intentions, but I disagree with his implication that this problem is neglected in our classrooms. In fact, teachers seek tirelessly, and have for decades, to instill in their students a healthy skepticism about public discourse. What is lacking is a healthy skepticism about ourselves. Scholar Richard Lanham's instruction to students is helpful: "The more odious you might find (an) opposing position, the more you should seek to know what would make someone hold such an opinion. And the more you should examine the grounds on which you hold your own" (Rutten and Soetaert 738). Rhetors who are inclined to critical inquiry too often reserve their criticism for people other than themselves, particularly those who disagree with them.

Such avoidance of self-scrutiny is, again, not a product of the digital age, but a fact of the human condition. In an effort to protect our pride, we hold firmly to our own ideas, clinging to whichever voices validate the message. In truth, it is our pride that is ultimately at risk, if we one day realize we'd been mistaken, believing something we come to regret (Marback 3). At first glance, vulnerability seems risky. It could "disrupt who we are" (Marback 7), exposing our inclinations, motivations, biases, and fears. Without it, however, we

face two greater risks: first, we are more likely to be influenced by the rhetoric of others if we cannot rightly criticize our own; second, we hold fastly to positions we will one day dismiss, losing rhetorical pull and opportunity in the meantime. There is no quick solution to this reality, whether in or outside the classroom. As a matter of fact, time is essential to the responsible handling of discourse. Our immediate access to information should be earning us time, but it somehow robs us of the best use of our time, since we are now rushing and competing, even as teachers, to participate in the ongoing public discourse that surrounds us. According to Booth, the measured discipline of listening carefully to the rhetoric we both hear and advance is our best defense against "skillful but unethical rhetrickery" (43).

In a discussion like this, where terms like truth and responsibility are being revisited, as they have been since Ancient Greece, I claim no one-size-fits-all gimmick that will solve the dire condition of public discourse that we now observe. Instead, I suggest that rhetorical pedagogy, instruction that focuses on the skillful and defensible use of rhetorical tenets, offers intervention for our students in a democratic society. Essentially, we are fools if we believe that teaching students to be nice, honest, fair, and cautious will prompt them to apply such values to their common discourse. Anyone who disagrees should ask a victim of bullying how many school assemblies and class discussions on bullying he and his tormentors endured. Booth says, "Direct nagging about values works no better than nagging about facts -- especially when teaching adolescents" (99). We intervene meaningfully by demonstrating to students that discovering and communicating the truth will benefit them far greater than advancing a convenient lie. Much like a counterfeit dollar that satisfies an immediate craving but proves far more costly when discovered, the lies that advance our own causes are our greatest liabilities.

I will now submit a theoretical classroom approach, one that realistically acknowledges students who likely care about their reputations and their social lives more than the betterment of the world, yet feel a genuine interest in societal issues. Teachers can capitalize on that relationship between self and social justice by encouraging students to select a cause they support, past or present, that has been influenced by public discourse. Examples include past issues, like the abolition of slavery, freedom of religion, and women's suffrage, or contemporary movements, such as #Metoo, #BLM, and #chooselife. Once students determine their cause, they seek out lies. For the purpose of illustration, the class could work together on a search of how famous athletes throughout history have disappointed their fans through trickery and deceit. Even students who are not sports fanatics will recognize the frustration for those who follow a team or a player, only to realize that bribery or steroids, rather than skill, accounted for their success (for instance, students might research the Black Sox Scandal of 1919 or Barry Bond's infamy in 2007). The goal in this exercise is not only for students to discover independently how deceit, in spite of its short-term effectiveness, does long-term damage, but also to connect that experience with a personal interest. No one wants to be made a fool by championing an athlete who proves to be a fraud. How much more so should we protect our social, emotional, spiritual, and cultural interests?

Because students will be naturally more forgiving of lies that further their own agendas, teachers must guide student research through prompts. For instance, a teacher might introduce the term "testimonial" as a rhetorical device and then prompt students to find examples -- within their self-selected movement -- of testimonies that have both supported and undermined the overall message. Students who are passionate about #BLM will fume to discover the false testimony given by Jussie Smollett, a year before the Black Lives Matter hashtag peaked, because such malingering fuels contention and mistrust. Smollet's hoax, and others like it, negatively impact genuine victims, as well as those who would support their cause.

Plenty of excellent teachers might pause at this point in the reading, hesitant to introduce socially and politically charged topics into the safety of their classrooms, and to an extent, I sympathize. We should not *trust* adolescents to carefully, respectfully, and responsibly discuss issues that are potentially offensive to others, but we should *teach* them to. Otherwise, they'll learn from us how to be critical of an opinion piece on a safe topic like homework rules or even dress codes, mastering the age-old tropes and schemes of rhetoric, but remaining ignorant in how to engage in the actual issues that interest them and fill their screens. When teachers teach rhetorical techniques, they are, in effect, handing persuasive ammunition to students who "may not be aware of the ramifications and implications of [their] craft… yet stand in a morally charged relation to [their] audience" (Rorty 729). This is why their first audience must be themselves. After all, no one should pick up a tool of any kind, let alone one with ammunition, without first understanding the harm it poses to themselves.

From this framework, the classroom culture becomes one that fosters truth-seeking as the antidote to pernicious lies. Promoting the responsible use of rhetorical devices in the classroom involves more than listening, more than research, more than persuasion; it centers on the experience of individual students to seek rightness, or truth, and to learn how to communicate that truth clearly and effectively, unafraid of opposition. In this way, students can be right without being triumphant over someone else. They can be truthful without agreeing with someone else. And they can change their minds without feeling shame for doing so. Our students are citizens who are already engaging, with or without their teachers, on issues that affect us all. For this reason, the classroom is not a place to forward a cause but a conversation. The promotion of rhetorical responsibility begins with teachers, themselves persuaders, who uphold truthfulness over and above their own perceived good.

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